

Understanding Collaboration

Introducing the Collaborative Governance Case Databank

Douglas, Scott; Ansell, Christopher; Parker, Charles; Sørensen, Eva; 't Hart, Paul; Torfing, Jacob

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INTRODUCTION



Understanding Collaboration: Introducing the Collaborative Governance Case Databank

Scott Douglas^a, Chris Ansell^b, Charles F. Parker^c, Eva Sørensen^d, Paul 'T Hart^e
and Jacob Torfing^d

^aUtrecht School of Governance, Bijlhouwerstraat 6, 3511 ZC, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands;

^bDepartment of Political Science, UC Berkeley, USA; ^cDepartment of Government, Uppsala University, Uppsala Sweden; ^dDepartment for Social Science and Business, Roskilde University, Roskilde, Denmark;

^eUtrecht School of Governance, Utrecht University, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

Studying collaborative governance has become a booming business. However, the empirical literature still struggles to produce robust generalizations and cumulative knowledge that link contextual, situational and institutional design factors to processes and outcomes. We still have not mustered the broad and deep evidence base that will really help us sort fact from fiction and identify more and less productive approaches to collaboration. The current empirical evidence in the study of collaborative governance consists chiefly of small-N case studies or large-N surveys. The challenge is to move from case-based, mid-range theory building to more large-N-driven systematic theory-testing, while also retaining the rich contextual and process insights that only small-N studies tend to yield. This article, and the articles in the accompanying special issue, introduces an attempt to provide this middle ground – the Collaborative Governance Case Database. The database has been developed to serve as a free common pool resource for researchers to systematically collect and compare high-quality collaborative governance case studies. This article is an introduction to the database, exploring its design, opportunities and limitations. This article is also an invitation; inviting all researchers to freely use the cases in the database for their own research interest and to help strengthening the database by adding new cases there are eager to share with colleagues.

KEYWORDS

Collaborative governance;
case studies; case database;
open data; new
methodologies

Finding the middle ground between richness and generalization

Studying ‘collaborative governance’ has become a booming business, much like the study of closely related phenomena like ‘policy networks’ and ‘partnerships’ was in the 1990s and 2000s. The key journals in public administration and public management have seen a surge in articles on the subject. Our manual count of collaborative governance case-study driven papers in five key journals in which this line of research is being published – *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, *Public Administration*, *Public Administration Review*, *Public Management Review* and *Policy Studies* – identified 154

CONTACT Scott Douglas ✉ s.c.douglas@uu.nl 📧 Utrecht School of Governance, Bijlhouwerstraat 6, 3511 ZC, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands

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articles for the period of 2014–2018 alone. This quite considerable number still excludes case studies of collaborative structures and initiatives published in this journal or more sectorial and specialized journals such as *Environment & Planning* or *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*. In addition, a stream of books covering a wide range of countries, sectors and issues has been produced in the past decade or so (e.g. Ansell and Torfing, 2018; Agranoff, 2012; Blomgren & O’Leary, 2008; Bryson, Crosby, & Bloomberg, 2015b; Donahue, 2012; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015; Goldsmith & Kleiman, 2017; Jing, 2015; O’Leary and Blomgren, 2009; Taylor & Sonnenfeld, 2017; Torfing, 2016; Torfing, Peters, Pierre, & Sørensen, 2012).

This surge in research on collaborative governance mirrors the changing practices of government organizations across the world in both policymaking and policy implementation. Having become more acutely aware of the limits to their capacity to govern effectively through classic top-down mechanisms of political decision-making and bureaucratic execution, governments have invested more in horizontal approaches. This has happened internally (e.g. efforts to ‘join up’ hitherto siloed approaches of different agencies), across different levels of government (e.g. ‘multi-level governance’), and externally in their engagement with non-profits, business and grassroot initiatives (e.g. ‘governance networks’). Sometimes government is not even the initiating party, but invited by civil society actors, businesses or indeed citizens to participate in collaborative problem-solving. Holistic, inclusive, cross-sectoral initiatives to tackle complex public problems that exceed jurisdictional, sectoral, and professional boundaries or defy existing repertoires are flourishing.

While the academic exchange is lively and the practitioner demand for input is high, one does not have to look very far to confront the challenges of producing useful and authoritative knowledge about collaborative governance. On the one hand, much of the literature still takes the form of rich case studies of individual collaborative efforts. Case studies offer a powerful strategy for theory-building and a deep sensitivity to complexity and context. Many public administrations and public policy scholars intuitively feel that context sensitivity and a keen eye for complex interactions are necessary to face the demand for validity and practitioners are attracted to case study research because it provides vivid, ‘battle-tested’ ideas that inspire experimentation. Yet, the limits of case study research are well known. They offer a limited strategy for causal identification or statistical generalization.

To compensate for these limitations, researchers turn to large-N research. Although large-N studies are less well developed in collaborative governance research, a number of researchers have developed survey methods that permit statistical evaluation of results. Quantitative research permits more robust generalization and facilitates causal identification (albeit within the increasingly well-known limits of large-N observational studies to control for various observational biases). Still, these large-N studies are also limited in their ability to produce generalizations or identify causation. Typically, they also focus on one or a few cases of collaboration. In other words, rarely do large-N studies treat *a* collaboration as a case in a statistical series.

It is useful to ask why this is the case. First, cases of collaboration are often relatively unique – that is, they develop idiosyncratically for specific local reasons and needs. Although collaborative governance is increasingly deployed as a more generic policy instrument, the bulk of collaborative governance cases have developed in an ad hoc

experimental fashion in response to local circumstances. Second, the study of collaborative governance is focused not only on contextual and institutional factors but also strongly emphasizes the role of agency, with researchers delving deeply into the role of attitudinal, behavioral and relational factors. In other words, perhaps even more so than in other areas of governance studies, collaborative governance analysis requires sustained dissection of endogenous variables. Third, collaborative governance is essentially a process of negotiation that depends on highly context-specific stakeholder interests and perspectives. All three of these factors suggest why case study research has been attractive and why it is difficult to generate large-N databases. On the one hand, case studies can capture the contextual richness of collaborative processes; on the other hand, it is challenging at best to collect systematic cross-case data on relatively unique cases with a high degree of endogeneity.

In response to these empirical challenges, we have developed an empirical strategy that attempts to combine the strengths of case studies and large-N studies – a databank of high-quality cases systematically coded using a standardized survey instrument. This databank attempts to preserve the richness of case studies, while facilitating systematic cross-case comparison and analysis. It seeks to combine the context-sensitivity and ground truths of case study research with the capacity for more robust causal identification and generalization associated with large-N studies. In developing this database, we have collaborated with researchers from around the world to collect 44 case studies in the database and 30 leading scholars have written six different substantive articles using the database. The first fruits of this project is presented in this special issue of *Policy and Society*, while the first 44 cases are immediately made openly accessible for all researchers working on collaborative governance. The database can be found at www.collaborationdatabase.org

This first article introduces the database, its design, and explores the opportunities and limitations of this new resource, including concrete ways for new researchers to join and leverage this database. Six additional original articles leverage the database to see how the collection of cases can be used to generate, explore and test theories about collaboration. As a whole, this Special Issue offers a proof-of-concept of a novel way of mobilizing shared knowledge. The article is therefore also an invitation to all researchers to freely draw from this new resource for their own particular projects and to help expand the case collection.

Designing the database

The design of the database had to address a range of questions. How to define collaborative governance? What different elements should be covered in the manual used to systematically describe and code the cases? What different types of quantitative and qualitative information should be collected? How can the quality and reliability of the data be ensured? There is no perfect way to addressing all of these questions, especially if the database aims to be comprehensive, but also usable. We talk through our decision choices and considerations here.

Collaborative governance

Taking into account the various conceptualizations of collaborative governance in the existing literature, we have chosen to conceptualize it in the dataset exercise as:

Table 1. Elements of collaborative governance covered by the case format.

Elements	Sub-elements covered
General case information	Timespan of collaboration and case study, research methods, jurisdictional level, country setting,
Main case characteristics	Policy domain, stated objectives of the collaboration
Starting conditions	Pre-history and trust between actors, resource and power balance between actors, incentives to collaborate
Institutional design	Number and background of actors, nature of rules for procedures, inclusion, decision-making
Leadership	Number and background of leaders, leadership role in convening, stewarding, mediating, and taking action
Collaborative process	Face-to-face contact, nature of meetings, investment in knowledge sharing, joint-fact finding and quick wins
Accountability	Monitoring and providing information to different stakeholders
Outputs and outcomes	Degree to which intended and unintended outcomes were generated, degree of trust and legitimacy among partners

a collective decision-making process based on more or less institutionalized interactions between two or more actors that aims to establish common ground for joint problem solving and value creation. Based on this definition and again taking into account the most commonly used process frameworks (e.g. Ansell & Gash, 2008; Bryson, Crosby, & Stone, 2006, 2015a; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015; Page, Stone, Bryson, & Crosby, 2015; Provan & Kenis, 2008;) we have distilled eight core elements of collaborative governance to be the central focus of the coding manual, with each element covering up to 10 sub-sections with specific questions (see Table 1).

All types of collaborative governance cases from all policy domains are welcome in the database. Cases may involve only government entities, only non-government entities, or a mix of the two. Cases may represent successes or failures or something in between. In order to determine whether a case is a case of collaborative governance, we employ the definition presented above. We further specify that a case of collaborative governance brings together a set of actors who collaborate on a shared issue over a specified time period within a given geographical space. The database allows contributors to chart the evolution of a collaboration over time. However, if the set of actors, the focal issue, or the geographical scope change drastically, the data may also be entered as separate but related cases.

Different elements

Firstly, the database had to decide what range of elements should be covered in a case format. There are multiple major frameworks detailing what matters, such as starting conditions, leadership roles, governance regime, and various outcomes (e.g. Ansell & Gash, 2008; Bryson et al., 2006; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015; Nabatchi, Sancino, & Sicilia, 2017; Page et al., 2015; Provan & Kenis, 2008). There is overlap between many of these frameworks, most of them highlight the importance of leadership and institutional design, but some models offer unique factors – for example, Sørensen and Torfing (2009) spotlight the importance of the link to democracy and Emerson and Nabatchi (2015) emphasize the importance of the starting regime.

Different types of information

Secondly, the database can be more useful by providing both quantitative scores from the original researcher (allowing for quick comparisons between cases) and more qualitative insights in the case (allowing for more in-depth analysis and interpretation of results). The format, therefore, asks researchers to rate both their cases on these key elements using a 5-point Likert-scale (e.g. ‘to what extent did the participants have shared incentives to collaborate?’) We then ask researchers to complement these scores with qualitative descriptions of the case. At all times, contributors can opt out of a question if they do not have enough information to answer the question.

Ensuring reliability and quality

The quality and reliability of the database are first ensured by accepting only cases which have been researched by academic scholars (so no admissions from practitioners or consultants describing their own work) and accepting only case material which has been previously presented in peer-reviewed or otherwise quality-controlled publications (e.g. PhD theses, research reports to parliament).

The database coding manual requires contributors to provide a lot of information about each case, and they may have differing depths of knowledge about the different elements of the case. For example, a leadership expert is naturally more focused on describing and interpreting the forms, roles and styles of leadership than on institutional structures or coalition-formation processes, or indeed assessing the outcomes of collaboration. The format, therefore, asks contributors to rate their confidence in their answers on a 4-point scale. Researchers drawing on the database can then knowingly select or deselect case information depending on the level of confidence they require for their study.

A final check is the review by the editorial board of the database which checks the clarity, consistency, and credibility of each submission. For example, discrepancies between the quantitative scores and qualitative scores can be addressed here, just as highly unlikely scores describing nearly perfect collaborations.

These different measures are provided to boost the reliability and internal validity of the cases. The external validity of the cases—the value of the case report to a different researcher using the case for a different question—ultimately depends on the researcher drawing cases from the database. They have to ensure they select the appropriate cases which speak to their questions and definitions.

Submitting a case to the database

The database submission process consists of five phases (see [Figure 2](#)). A qualified researcher fills out the case format and sends it to the database editorial board (at the time of writing composed of the authors of this article). After a check and potential improvements, the case is uploaded into an online case depository accessible to all participating researchers, i.e. researchers who have contributed a case. Researchers keen to use the database can browse the database and select the cases relevant to their purpose. Any subsequent publications cite the case studies from the database used for the analysis.

- Multiple choice questions

16. How was the collaboration first initiated?

Self-initiated by participants

Independently convened by a third party

Externally directed by law or authority

Don't Know

Select

- Likert scale questions

14. To what extent did the configuration of actors **it** have a pre-history of mutual engagement? (1 = 1

Score

1 2 3 4 5 Don't know

☐ ☐ ☒ ☐ ☐ ☐

- Long form open questions

21. Please describe in max. 600 words the (a) the prehist how the collaboration was initiated, (c) the sense of i the incentives to collaborate, (d) any significant chan

The process started off in a very adversarial way. Rec the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to court to force it to species and further court cases followed to try to stop. I stakeholders were very antagonistic towards one anot the collaboration was initiated by Clark County Govern

Figure 1. Overview of the different types of information collected.

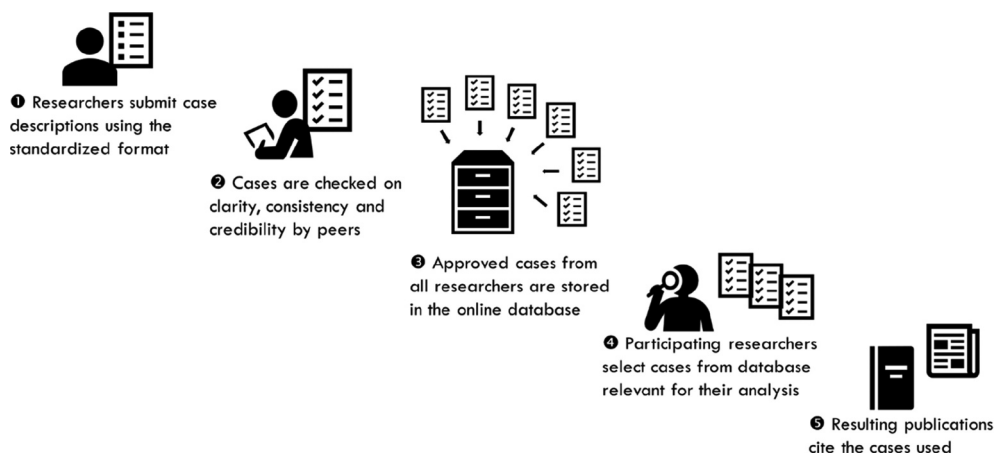


Figure 2. The management process of the collaborative governance case database.

We imagine that the editorial board of the database may opt every 5 years or so to add or change the questions to align with the emerging insights and questions in the field. The World Value Survey is also administered by a group of social scientists, debating which questions should be kept (to ensure cross-survey studies) and which should be changed in each edition of the survey. In a sense, the question of the case format will become an indication of what we as a research community know or want to know about collaborative governance.

Growing the database

The proof of the pudding is in the eating. We, therefore, wanted to explore the value and precise use of the database by filling it with cases and drawing analyses from this first batch. We have collaborated with collaborative governance scholars from around the world to generate 44 coded case studies in the database that was utilized to produce six distinct articles, which are presented in this special issue of *Policy & Society*.

All researchers were asked to code and submit a case that through prior case study research they had intimate knowledge of and therefore would be able to provide most information about (see the appendix for a full list of the 44 cases). Even then there are understudied domains and gaps in the knowledge. If such gaps exist in crucial sections of the database, the user may need to exclude the case from their data sample. The first 44 cases are not necessarily a representative sample of the universe of collaborative

governance case studies, but do provide an insight in what we know and do not know, or find difficult to know, about collaborative governance building on single case studies.

What we study

Table 2 provides an overview of cases in the database as of May 2020, listing their policy domain, country setting, government level, and overarching governance regime. As a whole, the 44 cases cover a diversity of policies, countries, levels, and regimes. Collaborations targeting environmental issues feature strongly, which is consistent with the strong position of this domain within the overall study of collaborative governance. However, collaborations related to security, social services, and health also feature prominently.

A large share of the cases come from the Netherlands and USA. Both countries indeed have active centers for the study of collaboration, but so do other countries, like Denmark, that are not yet proportionately represented in the database. The cases cover the different levels of government, but most cases are multi-level in nature. A minority of the cases cross international borders. Finally, more than half of the cases are externally directed, a large share was self-initiated, and only a tenth of the cases was started by an independent convener.

What we know and do not know

As discussed, contributors can rate their level of confidence for their answers in each of the sections on a 4-point scale (ranging from ‘not very’, ‘reasonably’ to ‘mostly’ or ‘highly’ confident). **Table 3** presents what share of the cases was awarded each degree of confidence. For example, the contributors of half the cases were highly confident that their description of the starting conditions was reliable, while this share fell to just over a third being highly confident in their description of the institutional design, and the descriptions of the Outputs and Outcomes received the lowest confidence scores.

Table 4 provides a more precise reflection of what case contributors did or did not know about their cases, highlighting which specific questions they answered with ‘Don’t Know’. Here, it is mainly the sections on Accountability and Outputs which receive the

Table 2. Overview of the cases in the database.

Policy domains *	Countries*	Level of government*	Governance regime
Environment (19)	Netherlands (12)	Local (31)	Externally directed (24)
Security (11)	USA (11)	Regional (22)	Self-initiated (16)
Social/work (10)	Australia (5)	National (12)	Independently convened (4)
Health (9)	Canada (2)	International (4)	
Infrastructure (7)	Germany (2)	Cross-border (2)	
Culture (6)	Sweden (2)		
Education (5)	Colombia (1)		
Agriculture (5)	Denmark (1)		
Economy Trade (3)	Italy (1)		
	Norway (1)		
	Switzerland (1)		
	Turkey (1)		
	Vietnam (1)		
	Global (4)		

(#) Number of cases in category* A case could belong to multiple categories

Table 3. Level of confidence per section of the case format.

Main dimension	Not very confident	Reasonably confident	Mostly confident	Highly confident
Starting conditions	0%	16%	34%	50%
Institutional design	5%	11%	45%	39%
Leadership	2%	16%	34%	45%
Collaborative process	5%	20%	36%	39%
Accountability	7%	18%	36%	39%
Outputs and outcomes	9%	20%	39%	32%

Table 4. Case contributors answering ‘Don’t Know’.

Main elements	Average ‘Don’t know’	Questions most frequently answered with ‘Don’t Know’
Starting conditions	2%	To what extent did the participants feel mutually dependent on each other for fulfilling their ambitions? (2x)
Institutional design	3%	To what extent were the decision-making processes in the key collaborative forums transparent? (7x)
Leadership	7%	To what extent was the leadership effective in resolving or mitigating conflicts between actors? (13x)
Collaborative process	6%	To what extent did the collaborative process explicitly focus on producing tangible intermediate outputs (quick wins)? (5x)
Accountability	10%	To what extent did the participants render account of the collaboration to civil society actors? (8x)
Outputs and outcomes	11%	To what extent did the collaboration achieve support among oversight bodies (i.e. auditors and courts)? (18x) To what extent did the collaboration create outcomes beyond its stated aims? (12x) To what extent did the collaboration achieve support among affected or concerned citizens? (10x)

highest scores. Researchers indicate they did not know the answer in about 10% of the questions of the cases. Specific questions about the involvement of oversight bodies and citizens were often left unanswered, as were questions about mediating conflicts and achieving pragmatic quick wins.

The lower scores for Institutional Design, Accountability and Outputs and Outcomes may be the result of both empirical and theoretical factors. Collaborations are often about fluid, implicit and complex negotiations that may be hard to pin down by any researchers. The outputs and outcomes of collaborations are often ambiguous and debated due to their multidimensional nature and the nature of the societal challenges involved. It is striking, however, that despite the theoretical importance placed on involving non-state actors, negotiating conflicts, and pragmatically achieving goals, these remain the issues that the contributing scholars report to know least about.

Assessing key components and consequences of collaborative processes

Contributing case authors rated their cases on many different elements, ranging from the starting conditions to outputs. These scales have for the most part been arranged in such a way that ‘1’ represents a condition thought to be disadvantageous to collaborations (e.g. low trust between actors), while ‘5’ represents a benign condition (e.g. high trust between actors). [Table 5](#) represents the average scores per element and the highest and lowest scored questions.

Table 5. Average score for each of the elements of collaborations.

Main elements	Average score	Highest and lowest scoring questions
Starting conditions	3.3	High: To what extent did the participants feel mutually dependent on each other for fulfilling their ambitions? (End) (3.8) Low: To what extent did the participants have more or less equal levels of resources, to bring to the collaborative process? (Start) (2.3)
Institutional design	3.3	High: To what extent was the collaboration inclusive? (Middle) (3.8) Low: To what extent were the procedural ground rules for the collaboration explicated by and for the participants? (Start) (2.7).
Leadership	3.6	High: To what extent was the leadership effective in bringing together the relevant and affected actors? (Middle) (3.9) Low: To what extent was the leadership effective in creating and realizing concrete opportunities for creative problem-solving resolving? (End) (3.3)
Collaborative process	3.4	High: To what extent did the participants in the collaborative process invest in knowledge sharing? (Middle) (3.9) Low: To what extent did the participants in the collaborative process invest in joint fact finding? (End) (2.7)
Accountability	2.8	High: To what extent were explicit joint goals articulated through statements of intent, memoranda, strategic plans, etc.? (Middle) (3.8) Low: To what extent did oversight bodies have influence over collaboration? (Start) (1.9)
Outputs and outcomes	2.9	High: To what extent did the collaboration produce a plan or policy for a shared problem or societal issue? (Middle/End) (3.8) Low: To what extent did the collaboration increase efficiency? (Start) (1.6) Low: To what extent did the collaboration increase legitimacy among stakeholders? (End) (1.6)

The average score suggests that the contributors on average rate their cases favorably when it comes to the starting conditions, institutional design, leadership and collaborative process. The contributors are most positive about the ability of the leaders to bring people together and the investment in knowledge sharing (both 3.9 on average). Contributors are much more critical about the accountability structures and realized outputs. They are outright skeptical about the ability of the collaboration to generate efficiency gains or, perhaps more surprisingly, generate increased legitimacy among stakeholders. On the upside, they strongly credit the cases rated when it comes to generating plans to address societal issues.

Drawing from the database

To really prove the value of this database, we asked 30 of the contributing researchers to work in teams and use the database for substantive papers. This has generated six different papers, with different methodologies, and different takes on the potential and limitations of the database.

The first article, by Chris Ansell, Carey Doberstein, Hayley Henderson, Saba Siddiki, and Paul ‘t Hart, explores the dynamics of inclusion (Ansell et al, 2020). They propose a framework to shape the empirical analysis of what contributes to inclusion in collaborative processes. They hypothesize that inclusion depends on active inclusion management and on strategic ‘selective activation’ of participants reflecting functional and pragmatic choices. Using a mixed-method approach to analyze these predictions, they find support for their ideas, particularly for the central importance of active inclusion management.

The second article by Eva Sørensen, Carolyn M. Hendriks, Nils Hertting and Jurian Edelenbos uses selected cases from the database to generate the new concept of political boundary spanning (Sorensen et al, 2020). The article empirically examines what form political boundary-spanning takes by studying how politicians operate at the interface between collaborative governance and representative policymaking in 28 collaborative governance cases. The study indicates that there is considerable variation in the way politicians perform political boundary spanning, including their degree of engagement in collaborative policymaking arenas and the focus of their boundary-spanning activities. The study also shows that collaborative governance tends to go best in tandem with representative democracy in those cases where politicians perform both hands off and hands on boundary-spanning activities.

The third article by Jacob Torfing, Daniela Cristofoli, Peter Gloor, Albert Meijer and Benedetta Trivellato focuses on the role of institutional design and leadership in spurring collaborative innovation (Torfing et al, 2020). The article draws suitable cases from the Collaborative Governance Data Bank and uses Qualitative Comparative Analysis to explore how multiple constellations of institutional design and leadership spur collaborative innovation. Their main findings are that the exercise of hands-on leadership is more important for securing collaborative innovation outcomes than hands-off institutional design, but that certain institutional design features reduce the need for certain leadership roles.

The fourth paper by Nicola Ulibarri, Kirk Emerson, Mark T. Imperial, Nicolas W. Jager, Jens Newig, and Edward Weber aims to understand how collaborative governance regimes evolve over time (Ulibarri et al, 2020). They apply a modified, grounded theory approach to the Collaborative Governance Case Database to develop empirically based theory about how collaborations are initiated, how they evolve over time, what conditions support or hinder this evolution, and how different developmental trajectories lead to differences in the outputs and outcomes achieved by these groups. They find that collaborations follow a variety of developmental trajectories, from failing to initiate to sustaining their operations for decades. However, many individual elements, including leadership, collaborative process, accountability, and outputs/outcomes, peak at the midpoint of the observed time, suggesting that even stable and healthy collaborations incur some decline in their robustness.

The fifth paper by Charles F. Parker, Daniel Nohrstedt, Julia Baird, Helena Hermansson, Olivier Rubin, and Erik Bækkeskov selects a subset of cases involving episodes or situations characterized by the combination of urgency, threat, and uncertainty to empirically explore a number of core theoretical assumptions about collaborative governance in the context of crisis management (Parker et al, 2020). The areas investigated in the article include starting-points and triggers for crisis management collaborations, level of collaboration, goal-formulation, adaptation through intra-crisis learning, the involvement and role of non-state actors, and the prevalence and impact of political infighting. The cases examined suggest that, regardless of different event types, several common challenges associated with the mobilization of diverse sets of actors and coordination of joint activities are likely to arise. These cases also display some positive experiences regarding joint capacities to formulate shared plans and orchestrating ad hoc organizational forms, despite turbulence, uncertainty and collective stress.

The sixth and final paper by Scott Douglas, Olivier Berthod, Martijn Groenleer and José Nederhand probes the validity of theoretical models detailing the conditions which collaborations must meet to achieve collaborative performance (Douglas et al, 2020). The importance of separate conditions – such as the presence of incentives to participate, appropriate institutional designs, or facilitative leadership – has been validated in various studies. How all of these conditions interact with each other, and whether all of the conditions need to be present to achieve performance, is less well understood. Their analysis of 26 cases shows that the presence of strong incentives for partners to collaborate is a crucial condition for success, with almost all performing cases sharing this starting point. However, performance was then achieved by combining strong incentives with either clear institutional design or with intensive collaborative processes, showing that collaborations can follow different routes to their objectives.

Discussion

Having reviewed the preliminary design, contents, and application of the database, we can begin to sketch the potential opportunities and limitations it offers.

Firstly, the database offers an opportunity to capture and compare many different cases of collaboration. The first batch of cases covers a wide range of countries, policy domains and levels of government. This diversity means that scholars utilizing the database must be careful to select only those cases that fit their research design. For example, Ulibarri et al. (this issue) consciously exclude many of the cases for their analysis of the evolution of collaborations, as they want to focus specifically on collaborative governance regimes.

Secondly, this initial proof-of-concept shows that the database can be used for very different purposes and methodologies. Some authors use the database inductively to browse cases and generate and heuristically explore thematic, middle-range theories (e.g. Sørensen et al. on political boundary spanning); others to apply and refine existing empirical insights and hypotheses (e.g. Ansell et al. on inclusion strategies); still others take existing theories and leverage the relatively large dataset offered by the database to test them comprehensively (e.g. Douglas et al. on pathways to performance). In each instance, the selection of the cases from the database had to be aligned to the purpose of the research design, and the same will hold true for future endeavors using the dataset in any of these ways.

Thirdly, the database as a whole gives an insight into what we know, do not know, or want to know about collaborations. The mere exercise of being forced to select the key questions to ask in the case format forced us to survey different theories and translate them into specific questions. The first results returned by the case contributors show what peaks and gaps we have in our empirical knowledge of cases. It remains very likely that other researchers will want to include different questions. Hopefully, the field will have grown enough to ask different and/or more pointed questions 5 or 10 years from now. Just as the World Values Survey has evolved over the numerous editions, we expect that the database will require some periodic updating. Future rounds of revision will provide a useful stimulus and focus to the collaborative governance research community.

Fourthly, the case database is an imperfect instrument. Although the question format and the review process have improved the quality and reliability of the data, there remains scope for different interpretations of questions and answers. Moreover, even at 61 questions and 20 pages of coded variables and narrative sections about each case, the format cannot capture everything the researchers may want to know. Thus, there is still a need for large-N, stringently standardized surveys, just as there is a need for intensive small-N fieldwork.

An invitation

The database offers a powerful new weapon in our collective armory, offering a middle road towards more insights into collaborative governance. The strength of this new method will be augmented by all researchers adding cases and using the databases to address their particular research questions. The database is the collective resource of the entire research community, highlighted by the free availability of the collected cases, and we invite all researchers to make the best use of this new tool. All researchers are expressly invited to add fresh cases you are eager to share with colleagues, draw cases from the database to analyze research questions interesting to you, use the case format as a platform for systematically collecting rich data about new cases or use it in any other way you see fit. We look forward to the new and exciting opportunities the database may unlock.

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Notes on contributors

Scott Douglas is assistant professor of public management at the Utrecht School of Governance. His research focuses on the performance management of collaborations, working closely with public sector organizations tackling issues such as radicalization, educational inequality, and obesity.

Christopher Ansell is Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley. His research focuses on understanding how organizations, institutions and communities can engage effectively in democratic governance in the face of conflict, uncertainty, and complexity.

Charles F. Parker is Associate Professor of Political Science at the Department of Government and serves as the deputy chair of the board for the Center for Natural Hazards and Disaster Science (CNDS) at Uppsala University. His research has focused on climate change politics, leadership, crisis management, and the origins and consequences of warning-response problems.

Eva Sørensen is Professor in Public Administration and Democracy at Roskilde University in Denmark. She has published a large number of articles and books about innovations in democracy

and governance, with particular focus on the changing role of politicians, and emerging forms of political leadership.

Paul 't Hart is professor of public administration at Utrecht School of Governance and the Netherlands School of Public Administration. He has written widely on leadership, crisis management, and policy in the public sector. He recently led the Successful Public Governance initiative at Utrecht University.

Jacob Torfing is professor of politics and institutions at the Roskilde School of Governance. His research interests include public sector reforms, network governance, collaborative innovation, interactive political leadership, and innovation management.

ORCID

Charles F. Parker  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0407-3939>

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Appendix: List of cases

Case Name	Origin
2010 & 2011 Ash Cloud Crises	Europe
Australian collaboration to develop front-of-pack food labelling policy	Australasia
Canadian wildfire responder network	North America
Independent Inquiry into Container Deposit Legislation in NSW	Australasia
Blackfoot Challenge (Montana, USA)	North America
Desert Tortoise Habitat Conservation Planning	North America
Search and Rescue operations following the 2011 Turkey earthquake	Europe
Joint Committee for Counterterrorism of the Dutch national agencies	Europe
Community Enterprise Het Klokhuis	Europe
Community Enterprise De meevaart	Europe
Collaborative governance in Vietnam flooding	East Asia
Chinchina Besin Management Plan	Supranational
Statewide Steering Committee to Reduce Family Violence in Victoria	Australasia
Rhode Island's Salt Ponds	North America
Homelessness policy development and program funding in Vancouver	North America
public-private-people collaboration in peri-urban area development	Europe
collaborative policy makingpolicy making committees in Gentofte; Denmark	Europe
Spitex	Europe
Area C – Milan	Europe
Hase area cooperation in Lower Saxony	Europe
Baker River Hydroelectric Project	North America
Delaware Inland Bays	North America
Narragansett Bay (RI)	North America
Lake Tahoe	North America
Tampa Bay	North America
Tillamook Bay, Oregon	North America
Foodborne disease outbreak in Germany	Europe
Infant Mortality CoIN	North America
Living Lab Stratumseind	Europe
Ebola 2014 Response by the United Nations and national governments	Sub-Saharan Africa
Friends of Redington Pass	North America
Local Network for Combating Illiteracy (City A, The Netherlands)	Europe
Local Network for Combating Illiteracy (City B, The Netherlands)	Europe
Local Network for Combating Illiteracy (City C, The Netherlands)	Europe
Grow houses in the neighborhood (Fight Against Organized Crime, Drugs)	Europe
Revitalisation of Central Dandenong, Melbourne	Australasia
Elite-Citizen Collaborations in NSW Parliament's Energy Inquiry	Australasia
Okay, here's how it goes (Fight Against Organized Crime, Motorcycle Club)	Europe
Aquaculture Partnership	North America
The 'Neighborhood Renewal Program', City of Stockholm	Europe
Collaborative policy makingpolicy making committees in Svelvik Municipality, Norway	Select
Swedish wildfire responder network	Europe
Usual Suspects (Fight Against Organized Crime, Human Trafficking)	Europe
Wanted Partners (Fight Against Organized Crime, Human Trafficking)	Europe